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Sacrifice or Solipsism: Paradoxes of Freedom in Two Anarchist Social Centres

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Abstract:

In this paper I analyse and problematise what I argue are the dominant modes of liberated subject formation performed through divergent modes of organising within two anarchist social centres in Bristol, UK. Drawing on practical examples, I show how practices oriented to equality, like consensus decision-making and more formalised and codified modes of conduct, perform and presuppose a conception of freedom as coextensive with the attainment of rational subjectivity. In order to participate, to consent and to practice the self-limitation required to safeguard the freedom of others, sovereignty over the self is required - reason must outweigh desire. Yet as the activist subject defers pleasure for the sake of others, the practice of freedom comes to feel more like moral duty. Participation is at once the marker of freedom yet enacted out of an obligation that is as oppressive to anarchists as it is patronising to the mythical community we/they try to attract. Arising in opposition to the felt oppression of these practices, I identify a set of more spontaneous, joyful and less codified (anti-)organisational forms. Against the duty-bound activism of the rational activist, this counter-current embraces a conception of personal freedom as the liberation of desire. While this approach creatively counters the 'martyrdom' of the activist to the collective cause, it risks a moral solipsism that is equally unacceptable to anarchists. Whether possessed of own desire or rational will, freedom, in both sets of practices, is seen as coextensive with sovereignty over the self. Freedom and equality are thus diametrically opposed.

Introduction: Freedom and Equality in Tension

As a prefigurative praxis that aspires to freedom *with* equality, the anarchism of contemporary anarchist social centres is constituted by a tension between personal liberation in the present and the 'long haul' and delayed gratification of struggle for collective emancipation. Often we get this balance wrong – giving up the things that nourish us for an infinitely demanding activism, or, conversely, emphasising self-care to the extent that the egalitarian character of anarchist praxis is difficult to identify.

The problem of personal versus collective liberation has a rich genealogy in anarchist praxis. It is evidenced in print, perhaps most strikingly in the acerbic debate between self-titled 'social anarchists' (see, for example, Bookchin 1995), and the individualist and 'post-leftist' anarchisms of Bey (1991), Black (1997), CrimethInc (2001, 2008) and Euro-American insurrectionism (see, *325 Magazine*, *Fire to the Prisons*). While contemporary anarchist practices tend to incorporate both of these tendencies (Davis 2010; Graeber 2009) the division should not be glossed over. At the root of this split are two very different conceptions of liberated subjectivity which are performed through quite different practices. For 'social' anarchism the liberated subject is a rational one, moved by an analysis of social injustice to create equality in the present. Conversely for or 'post-leftist' anarchisms, critical as they are of the modernist instrumentalism enrolled in social anarchism's rational subject, the subject is one of liberated desire. Both, imply not only the possibility but the desirability of unitary, sovereign subjectivity and in so doing counterpoise freedom to equality. The sovereign subject, like that of liberalism, requires universal moral law or innate benevolence to guide egalitarian conduct. Egalitarian conduct is thus rendered either duty or automatic response, rooted in essentialist claims about what it means to be human. Neither configuration, in their inherent restrictiveness, are acceptable to anarchists. Freedom and equality cannot be separated.

Of course, anarchism has long advocated an inextricability of freedom from equality – from Bakunin's 1866 maxim that until all are free, none are free, right through to

Todd May's anarchist reading of Ranciere that positions the enactment of the presupposition of the equality of all as central to the practice of freedom. But theory does not always translate neatly into practice. In this paper I draw on a four-year autoethnographic engagement with two anarchist social centres in Bristol, England to show how personal freedom or collective equality tend to take precedence in practice. I do this through an exploration of what I argue are the dominant modes of emancipated subjectivity enacted at these sites and expressed, cultivated and reinscribed through the texts (zines, posters and critiques) in circulation, which in turn constitute partial scripts on which performances of subjectivity draw. On the one hand, modes of self or group discipline that facilitate more egalitarian relationships tend to perform a rational subject, yet simultaneously, risk a 'martyrdom' of that subject to the collective cause. On the other, practices that are explicitly critical of the 'duty-bound' activist, perform a subject of liberated desire yet lack egalitarian potential. Meanwhile, the presupposition that either form of freedom is universally desirable is itself oppressive, or at the very least confusing, to those who do not share it. Crucially, neither space can be boxed neatly into the reductive frames of either 'post-leftist' or 'social' anarchisms. While each exhibits tendencies which privilege either freedom or equality, modes of subjectivity performed and presupposed by the practices and discourses that co-constitute these spaces are contradictory and incomplete – desiring *and* rational subjectivities are performed at both sites and by individuals.

Following Foucault, I understand subjectivity here not as innate or 'transcendental' but rather produced or cultivated through particular power-laden discourses and practices. Subjectivity is that category or *mode* of being that an individual inhabits in a particular historically contingent context. Thus 'worker', 'woman', 'activist' are modes of subjectivity – they are categories of being that individuals are invited to fulfil, *and* which individuals participate in the fulfilment of – they are relational, entail particular capacities and limitations and are rooted in specific cultural, ethnic and historical trajectories/genealogies. Conceptions of subjectivity and in particular, liberated subjectivity are important for anarchists – they govern what it is to have agency, to be a 'free' or 'oppressed', and themselves can entail forms of oppression.

My central argument is that the intractability of the individual/social tension emerges from the tendency within these opposing paradigms to conceptualise the human subject as essentially sovereign: human freedom is regarded as coextensive with access, either to the sovereign will or 'own' desire. If the liberated subject is sovereign, then power remains its 'constitutive outside'. This turns those practices of self-discipline, that are necessary to create equality, into modes of self-oppression. Meanwhile, those practices of self-care, necessary for freedom to be prefigurative, become a form of narcissism. If anarchist practices are to avoid 'martyrdom' in pursuit of equality, and narcissism in pursuit of freedom, the concept of sovereignty over the self must be abandoned.

The Sites:

Kebele

Kebele is Bristol's, and indeed one of the UK's, longest-running anarchist social centres. The building was squatted in 1994 amidst the multitude of networked, spectacular and creative modes of resistance that formed a particular formative moment in UK 'DIY culture' (McKay 1998). Originally squatted, participants were able to buy the space after a resisted eviction provided just enough time to form a cooperative, secure a loan from Radical Routes and fundraise for a deposit. Residential spaces helped pay the mortgage and the building is now owned outright by the Kebele Community Cooperative. Kebele offers a multitude of activities and 'DIY services' including a bike workshop, debtors alliance, a weekly vegan café, radical library and infoshop as well as classes and 'skillshares' from yoga and languages to tools and tactics for radical organising. The space is well used as a meeting and events space by the Kebele Cooperative as well as a variety groups working on issues from migration struggles and prisoner solidarity to environmental direct action and animal rights.

With the longevity of the project longevity, its ethos is well established, having been thought, collectively deliberated upon, codified and revised by successive waves of participants. Explicitly stated "core principles", include broad values including equality, non-hierarchy, mutual aid and not-for-profit as well as the practical

commitment to put these into action through collective decision-making and organisation, openness and inclusion and shared responsibility. These “principles” according to Kebele’s website

"reflect the sort of world [...] members want to see and help bring into reality. It is these principles which make Kebele a radical social centre. Instead of waiting for that ever far away big moment of revolution, or for leaders and authorities to sort out our problems, we recognise that we can make fundamental changes here and now, in the ways we organise, communicate, interact and take action".

Over time established norms developed that govern how things from cooking in the café to making decisions collectively should best be done. Though there to promote ‘best’ practice and to guard against the subtle emergence of hierarchy, this fixing of procedures, particularly in a relatively formal mode of consensus decision-making could feel stifling to participants, new and old.

"When Kebele started there were a lot of transient types about, travellers, festival people, people from the road protest movement. They’d stay a bit and put a lot of effort in and then move on, and then they’d come back later with a kid, dogs looking for a place to crash. That was really the vibe of the space. On a Sunday people would be playing guitars, mandolin, drumming... it was tribal. As time went on, rules got made and sort of policies got put in place by the people who stuck around. When those on the move came back they’d often react badly - like as if a principle of freedom has been undermined. Gradually those transient types came less and less” NJ from Feildnotes 19

In addition to abiding collectively-imposed rules, managing a permanent space also includes certain mundane and un-glamorous tasks like paying council tax, insurance, electricity and water, dealing with licensing authorities and preparation for the dreaded health and safety inspection. More often than not, such tasks fall on a small group of individuals - those who ‘stuck around’ - and who commonly feel both committed and burdened by the often invisible work of just keeping the space running. Whilst permanence brings a degree of autonomy in a movement where projects must usually choose between transience and rent, it brings other binds both personal and collective. Security seems to come at a price: normalization and

bureaucracy – a combination that can exhaust the savings of even the most die-hard self-defining ‘activist’.

The Factory

The Factory similarly emerged from a period of high intensity transient political performances, but much more recent ones. In early 2008 a group of squatters, of which I was one, came together in response to an international ‘call-out’ for the defense of squats and autonomous spaces. Taking action under the name, ‘Bristol Space Invaders’ (BSI), this new collective created a number of temporary spectacular squatted event-spaces tied in with local struggles from gentrification to climate change, militarism and animal rights combining a potent mix of art, performance, protest, pedagogy and entertainment alongside incomplete glimpses of the kind of social relations we wished to universalize. Despite apparent success, by late 2009 BSI were already becoming critical precisely of the temporary and spectacular character of these interventions. We longed to create something both more durable and more ‘relevant’ to a mythical local community we believed to exist just beyond reach. Many of us felt a sense of exhaustion with the life-rhythm of intense effort towards momentary events only to disassemble our work (time permitting) before eviction and then spending the following months either recovering or planning for ‘the next big thing’. Perversely, in our attempt to celebrate the present, we ended up living for the future. In early 2010 in a bid to enact a more personally sustainable and locally connected creative resistance, we occupied 2-8 Cave Street, a derelict Edwardian Shoe Factory in St Pauls, Bristol with the intention of creating a new anarchist social centre, one along the lines of Kebele, but retaining, we hoped, the spontaneity and fun of our previous temporary endeavours. The ‘The Factory’ social centre was born.

With the building in a state of total disrepair the first six months consisted almost entirely of building and repair; plumbing, electrics, roofing, windows, floors, walls and rooms to house seventeen participant-residents. This material struggle was in many ways the easy part – physically tough yet manifestly straightforward: it was clear what needed to be done and the effects of doing it were immediate. Tasks like painting a wall could be easily handed over from one volunteer to another without

exhaustive instructions. This was a far cry from the complex work that always remained 'to come' – that of making links with neighbours and local groups who for one reason or another we thought *should* want to use the space.

Equally complex was the creation of a process for living together in accordance with the desire for a world free from domination – or more often than not, managing the fall-out from our lack of one. Our prior experience of collective working produced a rather different flavour of autonomous organising to that enacted at Kebele. Though we did operate a consensus decision-making model, it tended toward informality in an attempt to facilitate spontaneity and avoid the perceived 'over-organising' and even boredom that some associated with Kebele. Informality gave a life and frivolity to meetings, maintaining to some extent the creative spark of our previous collective experiences, but did not always guard against the subtle emergence of informal hierarchy or ensure that everything that needed to get done. The Factory's prefigurative character seemed to lie beyond the formalisation of 'process', existing instead in the informality of *living* differently, collectively; finding and sharing food, cooking, breaking and building together to create our dreams as well as picking them apart over a bottle of booze.

Meanwhile, the Police, Fire Service and Local Council in different ways all put up resistance. These ranged from the threat of eviction on the grounds of a 'duty of care' for fire safety, to more explicit intimidation and surveillance punctuated by the erection of a CCTV camera pointed at the front door after the UK-wide riots in August 2011. These external threats, culminating in the purchase of the building by Christian development company, PG Group, in September 2011, seemed to force the closing of doors as we mobilized selves to resist. As we built barricades we undoubtedly felt closer to each other but so much further from the mythical others we initially sought to attract. With the eviction in November 2011 and the building now lost, our goal of retaining the spontaneity and creativity of our temporary events in a lasting project, without simultaneously producing new oppressive regimes of self-government remains an unrealised, perhaps impossible demand.

Freedom as Sovereign Rationality

Facilitator: OK, so I see a few new faces so maybe we should just quickly run over the process we use here? [nods of agreement – one or two participants wave their hands, palms facing outwards in apparent silent applause] So basically, if you have a point to make raise one hand like this' [raises one hand with a single finger extended] and if you have an urgent point – a direct response to whatever was just said – then you raise two hands – but it has to be really urgent and relevant as you're jumping the queue. Use it sparingly. OK, so yeah, if someone makes a proposal and you agree with it you can do this [waves hands palms facing the group] and if you disagree you can do this [waves hands palms down facing the knees]. I know it looks a bit weird but it's just to avoid things getting agreed on the basis of who shouts loudest – so that we can see we're all part of whatever decision we're making. So, is everyone OK with that? [a few people wave their hands as demonstrated] Is everyone OK with that? [Approx. 90% wave hands] Is everyone OK with that? [Smiling. The final stragglers somewhat self-consciously give a limp wave of the hands along with everyone else] Cool – let's start then.

(Fieldnotes, Kebele, March 2012)

Consensus decision-making process as introduced briefly here, whether employed more or less formally, is a technique for maximising participation in the decisions that affect the life of the participant, and by extension, the group. Consensus process occupies normative status at Kebele, The Factory, and in many anarchist and non-hierarchical collectivities (CrimethInc 2012; Graeber 2009: 321; Lance 2005; Wilson 2014). In a consensus process, participation is constituted by giving or withdrawing consent in the context of a given decision, as well as in the prior deliberative practices of shaping a proposals on which a decisions must be taken (Lance 2005). In maximising authorship in the decisions that affect their lives, participants aspire to minimize the likelihood of domination by one over another since it is presumed that freely-acting subjects will not consent to be dominated.

Though consensus process is relatively new to anarchist organising¹ co-emerging with contemporary anarchism in the later half of the 20th Century (Cornell 2009;

¹ While consensus process is relatively new to western political organising, forms of consensus decision-making have been used by a variety of non-western societies for many thousands of years. For a more detailed account of consensus-process in non-western

Gordon 2008; Maeckelbergh 2011; Wilson 2014), anarchists have long-favoured directly democratic organisational forms and criticised political representation. Proudhon referred to representation as 'subterfuge' while Bakunin called it 'an immense fraud' (Cohn 2003: 54). As May argues,

for anarchists representation signifies the delegation of power from one group or individual to another, and with that delegation comes the risk of exploitation by the group or individual to whom power has been ceded (1994: 47).

But it is not only the risk of exploitation under delegated power that anarchists find problematic. The act of 'being spoken for' is regarded as a certain 'indignity' in and of itself (*ibid*; Heckert 2012). To the extent that representative systems limit the ability of an individual to actively consent to decisions that affect them, they are regarded as inherently less liberatory, even if practiced without 'abuse'. In addition to being anti-representative, consensus processes are also anti-majoritarian. In smaller autonomous groups like Kebele and the Factory, majority rule is an absolute last resort, and one that I never experienced the use of. Just as all are able to exert their say on the shape of a decision, all participants have effective veto. That veto is only to be used sparingly – in theory, only when the decision, in the view of the participant, threatens to contradict the group's shared aims; the pre-existing consensus on which the democratic procedure is based. In large-scale consensus processes like Occupy where shared aims were less clear and/or norms around the minimal use of veto may be less well established, 'super majorities' of eighty to ninety-five per cent have been used (Graeber 2013: 212) to avoid the use of the veto by small minorities understood to be 'derailing' the process.

Whether unanimous or by super-majority, decision-making through consensus process, is radically participatory in comparison to representative and simple majority democratic procedures. It is thus understood not only as liberating – as a mode of empowerment (Gordon 2007) – but also radically egalitarian – as a 'process of continuously decentralizing power' (Maeckelbergh 2011: 10). Where practiced

contexts see, Gelderloos 2010. For a genealogy of consensus-process in North America, see Cornell 2009.

skilfully, it protects the will of the one from rule by the many and the will of the many from rule by the one.

In order to engage in consensus process 'skilfully', it is necessary to know oneself – at least to know one's own 'will' – to know the rules of the decision-making procedure and to work on oneself in particular ways. It is the responsibility of the subject to perform self-discipline by withholding veto unless shared aims are threatened, and to know when and how to use that veto in order to challenge proposals that do threaten shared aims. In this context the participant who is able to master articulate speech and able to remember often complex and convoluted arguments, points and proposals will be able to participate more fully than those less able to do so. To participate in consensus – which in anarchist contexts is to be free – is premised on, and performative of a particular mode of ethical subjectivity: the responsible, self-disciplined, reflective, rational subject.

This bears a striking resemblance to the subject presupposed and cultivated by neoliberal governmentalities. Governmentality similarly invites subjects to participate, to be free where freedom entails the performance of responsibility, rational decision-making and self-discipline, which in turn enables a withdrawal of responsibility by the state in particular spheres of social life. Of course, anarchists desire not only the withdrawal of the state from the social sphere (for this alone facilitates its strengthening as resources are redirected into the security apparatus) but its abolition. The anarchist cultivation of self-disciplined, autonomous subjects is, we might argue, precisely an illiberal project to the extent that it facilitates the abolition of the representative citizen-state relationship. Neoliberalism then should not be seen as having a monopoly on self-government – it is not the sole mode of governmentality (Appadurai 2001; Kesby 2005).

While anarchist and neoliberal governmentalities must be differentiated, anarchism as performed through consensus, is nonetheless a mode of governing through freedom – participation is premised on the performance of a particular mode of subjectivity and anarchist spaces are replete with tacit rules governing proper conduct (Wilson 2014) and regulating who may and may not enter (Ince 2012). As Sharma argues,

Both counterhegemonic and hegemonic uses of empowerment are, following Foucault (1991), governmental, in that they aim to produce aware and active citizen-subjects who participate in the project of governance to mold their behaviour toward certain ends (Sharma 2009: 3).

Counter-governmentalities are still governmentalities (Larner 2009: 4; Li 2007: 275). Moreover, though anarchism *strives* to enact an illiberal politics, it is not immune from the slip to liberal modes of subjectivity. The ethical subjects consensus processes call forth risk such a slippage. Like Kantian subjectivity that underpins liberal thought, ethical conduct in consensus process is premised on accessing and acting upon the rational will. For Kant, as for many anarchists, in order for the individual to be truly 'autonomous' she must decide the rules by which she lives in the absence of external influence (Newman 2003). Reflecting rationally within a particular situation, the Kantian subject is able to access universal moral laws, since rationality is presupposed to be universal and morality is presupposed to be rational. This neat procedure seemingly provides the subject with an ethics in the absence of authority. Herein resides the anti-authoritarian character of enlightenment thought as well as its attraction for anarchists. But if rationality is universal and already-embedded within the subject, then humans are free but only to make the rational choice. As postcolonial and anti-racist scholars have argued, Western rationality, far from being universally embedded in all human beings, is a specific ethnophilosophy that emerges in 'a particular historical location marked by gender, race, class, region and so on' (Sandoval 2000: 8). The autonomous rational subject is white, western and male. Moreover, this liberal subject has only been made possible through the violent exclusion of other forms of subjectivity (such as 'madness') that deviate from this ideal (Foucault 1977). While the Kantian subject may initially be attractive to anarchists in providing a route to ethics in the absence of 'external' authority, it can engender precisely the authoritarianism it seeks to elide.

So what do we do? Consensus process arises from a valid critique of representative and majoritarian decision-making procedures. Would an irrational democratic procedure be somehow more liberating? Bookchin's (1995) derision of individualist and post-leftist anarchisms, and of Foucault's work (p. 10), mistakenly equates the critique of instrumental reason with a proposal for mysticism and heresy. Bookchin

takes the critique of a specific mode of rationality, its dominance and power effects, as a critique of rationality itself. Foucault regarded this imperative to either accept rationality or fall prey to the irrational as a certain 'blackmail' that 'operates as though a rational critique of rationality were impossible' (Foucault 1988: 27). My concern here is with the work that the concept of freedom as coextensive with rationality does in the context of two social centres. This need not imply the abolition of rationality – simply, a more careful and reflexive approach to the way in which it is mobilised and an attentiveness to its power effects.

'Shall we just start without them?'

(Participant, start of a Kebele Meeting, November 2009)

In a group framed by the valorisation of freedom with equality, participation in decision-making, as the manifestation of rational subjectivity, becomes normatively coded as 'good'. Participation is freedom-with-equality and freedom-with-equality is desirable/good. Accordingly, in cases of minimal turnout for decision-making regarding the space, there commonly results a sense of disbelief that others do not desire participation. This is paired with a paradoxical sense in which those present are shouldering a level of decision-making experienced as oppressive. There is a felt sense that others *should* be responsible, *should* help 'share the burden' (of freedom). When the burden of freedom is not shared, calls for help can take an accusatory tone, one that, perversely (and unsurprisingly), only seems to repel others from coming to the assistance of the diligent:

why would I attend a meeting to be told off about what a shit activist I am? If they just emailed and said, look we really need some help then I'd be more responsive.

(AN, Kebele, June 2010)

That particular meeting turned out not quite to be the 'telling off' this non-participant feared. However,

despite my attempts [as facilitator] to keep things lively, it was one of the most tense, awkward and slow meetings I've been to for a while. It felt like certain individuals who felt 'burnt-out' by the process, were projecting that feeling onto the meeting - slowing things down that could move faster, over-complicating issues – to allow others to 'share their pain'. The meeting actually finished early, but not content to

leave it on a high, two meeting stalwarts searched for an issue to fill the time with, and duly discussed it in spite of the evident low collective energy.

(Fieldnotes, July 2010)

In this ironic reversal, participation is at once framed as liberating, yet is experienced as an oppressive moral imperative that *should* be adhered to in spite of seemingly more immediate desires. This obscures the possibility that a sense of liberation may also be felt in not having to decide, especially so in situations of high trust. By framing participation as an individual obligation, and through the rigid adherence to process (like meeting length), a purportedly emancipatory process comes to feel like a burden. Freedom here functions as a mode of governing selves through disciplined participation. This self-government necessarily implies the government of others: the performance of responsible participation renders non-participants deviant or unfree (Rimke and Brock 2011: 195).

The framing of freedom as coextensive with the realization of rational selfhood is also productive of a particular work *ethic*. Rational analysis of a purportedly given situation defines a problem for which a response is required and a particular form of action – direct, visible, material – is privileged as the appropriate response. To the rational anarchist the world is ‘rendered technical’ (Li 2007, 2007a). This is signalled clearly in the term ‘activist’. Action, output and productivity tend to be what is valued over forms of immaterial labour like care and reflection (Heckert 2012; Shukaitis 2009). Where governmentality scholarship has called attention to the production of ‘active’ consumer subjects in a range of social spheres (Rose 1999: 166, 178) here we see a mirror of this dynamic in the production of ‘active’ anti-capitalist subjects. Privileging action and activity as the marker of liberated subjectivity, imbues those participants who are able to perform socially sanctioned ‘action’ with the respect of peers and informal power over those less disposed to act similarly.

Jane: *The people who have left the Factory recently have been those lacking the privilege of ‘good mental health’*

Me: *You’re right, I guess in these intensely socially interactive spaces it can be really tough to be unwell – what if you don’t want to talk to anyone that day, to just be alone?*

Jane: *Yeah, I feel like there is a real lack of understanding, of compassion for people experiencing problems because of the culture of 'getting shit done' – some people don't realise that just getting up in the morning is a real struggle if you're depressed and the socially imposed guilt for not being as productive as others in the space can make you feel worse, less valued, deviant in a space where we are supposed to be deviant.*

(Fieldnotes, September 2012)

Herein lies a key tension of anarchist prefigurative spaces. They seek, on the one hand, to actively challenge the impending world of domination beyond their doors, a task conceived in epic proportions requiring all efforts by all people right now, yet at the same time to prefigure a more caring, restful and frivolous alterity in which human value is not determined by output. While prefigurative spaces neither straightforwardly reproduce nor ever exist fully outside of hegemonic norms (Cooper 2007), as research on queer prefigurative spaces and normativities has shown, the process of normalisation is often quick to (re-)establish itself (Brown 2012: 208; Portwood-Stacer 2012; Rouhani 2012). At Kebele and the Factory, all too often the work ethic we claimed to rise against was recreated in attempts to prefigure alternatives. Living in accordance with this ethic, individuals performed a socially recognised form of liberated subjectivity, while those that failed to conform risked exclusion or were excluded. 'Participation's claim to inclusivity then acts to exclude and delegitimise those who decline to participate' (Kesby 2005: 2042).

Sometimes it feels like all we have to offer is complaints, critique, negative analyses, like we're telling people that anything remotely fun or enjoyable is bad

(Participant, 'Cake or Death' Discussion, The Factory, January 2011)

The productivity work ethic is compounded by the acerbic culture of critique in radical spaces. Critique is a key strength of emancipatory social movements, relentlessly calling attention to the gaps between aspiration and practice, and often opening new spaces for becoming (Eisenstadt 2016). But when self-consciously demanding the impossible – as anarchists do – critique can produce a continual and exhausting sense of failure especially when it questions practices while taking aims for granted. At the Factory, this kind of instrumental yet unending critique was so prevalent that it left little space for reflection on what worked. This cultivated a

cynicism towards experimentation and, perversely, a reinscription of the morally-loaded productivity work ethic: “We just need to do the same thing better, harder, faster, more efficiently and we can’t celebrate success because there’s a long way still to go”.

One area to which this form of criticism was persistently directed was the Factory’s largely ‘failed’ goal to ‘reach out’ to a mythical community we sought to serve. In our obsession with this perceived failing we refused to recognize our success in the creation of a well used, functioning, albeit predominantly anarchist, resource centre. This does not mean we should demand the possible or avoid self-criticism, but simply that we should make space for recognition of the unintended positive consequences of demanding the impossible in order to provide the affective sustenance to keep going.

The question of the participation of an other, discursively represented by the figure of ‘the community’, was a persistent theme in reflective discussions within both spaces and is a common concern for social centres more widely (Chatterton 2010: 1215-18). In early discussions prior to occupying the Factory, ‘community’ was understood quite critically: ‘the community’ was once struck off a leaflet outlining who the Factory aimed to serve, on the grounds that the term ‘has already been co-opted by neo-Labour’ (Space Invaders Meeting, December 2009). Nonetheless, the aim of ‘community outreach’ returned and returned in weekly meetings. Critiques of concepts do not always have a lasting effect on actual practices (Rouhani 2012).

In seeking to understand why others did not take part, or might want to use the spaces in ways that exempt them from decision-making, explanations offered included: the white-dominance, gender-dynamics and physical accessibility of the spaces; the allegedly ‘off-putting’ aesthetic qualities like the colour of the walls, the tattoos or asymmetric haircuts of other participant and the font, imagery and wording used in flyers and posters. Some argued that if only the community were better informed, if only the impositions of the media, work, schooling and other forms of social control were ‘thrown off’ they would join us. Some suggested that non-participants are working too hard just to survive right now and therefore don’t have time. A few suggested they may be resisting in other ways. Mahmood

highlights a parallel way of accounting for the Other in Western Feminist accounts of women's Islamic piety movements (2012 [2005]: 5-15). Seeking to understand participation in activities they see as non-liberating, Western Feminism, Mahmood argues cites three possible explanations: (1.) false consciousness – women are tricked by the 'the system'; (2.) the necessity of survival – they have objective material interests [which we define]; or (3.) covert resistance – they are resisting in ways we are unaware of. Embedded in this thinking is the assumption that freedom as *we define it* is the fulcrum of human fulfilment – it therefore follows that all humans should want to pursue *our vision* of liberation. Notable here is the 'should'. As White and Hunt argue, the liberal notion of freedom not only 'provide[s] the capacity to choose, it also requires that we *have to choose*; this is the paradox of freedom' (White and Hunt 2000: 108 my emphasis). Or as Rasmussen argues, 'the demand that we be allowed to self-govern is also a command that we do so' (Rasmussen 2011: xv). The subject of freedom is then transformed into a subject of obligation driven not by desire to take control of one's life but by duty that one *should*.

It feels like we're treating 'public' involvement like a company would their target market – we want to attract them to our uniquely positioned product in the present social context – like the pound stores that open in a recession we aim to strike when times are hard. It's too one sided – it's always about getting 'them' to come to 'us'.

(Fieldnotes, October 2009)

Joseph argues that the appeal of 'community' in popular discourse is that it seems to offer resistance to assimilation, modernisation, and capital penetration as a source of authentic, pre-capitalist, and/or anti-capitalist social relations (2002). At Kebele and the Factory, the desire to include 'the community' certainly drew legitimacy from these positive associations. However, where Joseph analyses the use of 'community' to refer to identity-bound collectivities (and their exclusionary effects), 'the community', for Kebele and Factory participants, refers to an undifferentiated mass, an other that is anyone *but* 'us'. The heterogeneity of community is thus collapsed, while the specificity of our own grouping (disproportionately white, highly educated and young) is erased (Thompson 2010). 'We' are positioned as 'normal', as the embodiment of a universal standard of humanness, while 'they' represent the 'local', the specific, the 'return' to an 'authentic' form of social connection. 'Community' is

that which we desire to attract, yet simultaneously represents a backwardness in a lineage of progress where social centres are the bright future.

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In a conflict resolution workshop at the Factory in 2011, facilitators shared a common technique for reflection on a perceived grievance by which the subject is urged to consider her own needs in a given situation involving conflict. 'Need' here does not necessarily refer solely to objective, material requirements for life but also to emotional and/or psychological ones. It includes, therefore, what might be thought of from a purely rationalist perspective as 'desires'. In the workshop, mainly attended by self-identifying 'activists', it was immediately alarming how difficult it was for participants to articulate their 'needs' – material or otherwise, particularly in relation to their activism. Articulating 'own' need or desire – for connection, to be involved in a particular form of organising, to be part of a supportive group or to live a particular way of life – seemed to be taboo. Instead the over-riding norm was to frame action in terms of some kind of moral obligation based on a rational analysis of a purportedly given situation. This concealment, or lack of awareness of individual needs behind the assumed needs of others is productive of a problematic dynamic: on the one hand of burn-out through ascetic self-denial and pressure to work harder for *them*; on the other, of paternalistic relations of benevolence towards those attempt to save.

Freedom as the Liberation of Desire

The activist uses moral coercion and guilt to wield power over others less experienced in the theology of suffering. Their subordination of themselves goes hand in hand with their subordination of others – all enslaved to 'the cause'. Self-sacrificing politicians stunt their own lives and their own will to live [...] the partisans of absolute self-sacrifice. (Andrew X, 1999).

Reaction to the self-oppressive character of forms of social action based around instrumental rationalities is put in fewer places more forcefully than in Andrew X's polemic critique, *Give Up Activism* (1999). This was the first text read at the Factory

reading group. In this piece, moral obligation is lambasted on the grounds that it constitutes a form of coercion, outside and against the desiring subject. For Andrew X, the activist is an ascetic whose practices of self-discipline, denial and virtuous hard work lead far from the path of liberation.

The Situationist critique of the pre-'68 left as lifeless, duty-bound, ascetic and tactically unimaginative, resonated profoundly with individualist, post-, drop-out and modifier-refusing anarchisms of the 1990s, Andrew X being no exception. Black's (1997) *Anarchy After Leftism* called on anarchists to abandon failed and outmoded 19th Century tactics, and their commitment to enlightenment humanism. Provocatively expressing the critique of rationalist revolutionary duty, Bey's *Temporary Autonomous Zone* (1991) called forth a nomadic, desiring subject untethered by the imposition of 'externally imposed' morality. A decade later, CrimethInc (2001), alongside innumerable authors of self published 'zines' and articles, pushed this desiring nomadism forward, proposing a similar praxis of lived negation of capitalist, white supremacist, patriarchal and other hierarchical social relations and subjectivities (see, Lyle 2010; Lockdown 2011). Organising the masses and actively attempting to encourage participation in large-scale collective projects, even 'community organising', are often understood here as inherently authoritarian as well as self-oppressive endeavours. Instead, critics propose lives of liminality, crime, squatting, skip-diving, shoplifting, and scams alongside permaculture gardening and DIY, as well as a provocative attack on perceived sites of power through insurrectionist acts of creative destruction – property destruction, arson (see, 325.nostate.net) and acts of 'performative violence' (Juris 2005).

This Situationist-inspired, post-modern-dropout, insurrectionist, and anti-organisationalist current resonated deeply within the Factory. Many of us had recently come through, or were still participating in Bristol's illegal rave scene and the squatted Temporary Autonomous Art exhibitions that formed part of Bristol's intersecting art, party and protest subcultures. Bey's 'poetic terrorism' seemed to speak to these practices and struck a chord with our prior involvement in temporary autonomous zones as *Bristol Space Invaders*. Though CrimethInc's seductive poetics were often the subject of parody – 'wow man, that's so CrimethInc – wanna go make love in dumpster?' – the life of liminality they described was very close to that of many

residents and their texts were among the most widely thumbed. Andrew X's 'Give up Activism' was the first of many texts to be read at the Factory reading group and the info-shop and zine library were composed predominantly of insurrectionist and broadly anti-organisationalist texts. Whether or not acts like those endorsed on those pages – or on the posters of burning cop cars and post-apocalyptic-cum-revolutionary scenes that decorated the walls – were ever carried out, their presence served as endorsement of a form of freedom honouring desire and eschewing moral duty.

The desiring subject was not only performed and presupposed through personalised practices like sourcing food and creating housing through squatting – but also through an approach to collective working that aimed to avoid forms of organisation that were experienced as too rigidly structured. Where Kebele had tended to codify working practices to ensure quality and equality, the Factory aimed to facilitate a greater degree of spontaneous and individually differentiated forms of action.

At the Factory, having a rota would be counter-productive – only people who are comfortable with this level commitment would put their names down and most object on principle anyway – a rota would just annoy the 'rota-happy-people' since reading it would seem like it was only them doing the work. This would create a sense of misplaced injustice since it's not that those unhappy with the rota wouldn't do the work, but that they would desire not to be pinned down to a task at a point in the future, and instead prefer do it when they feel like it.

(Fieldnotes February 2011)

Here we see quite a different form of liberated subjectivity from the rational subject of consensus – the desiring subject is committed to collective action but actively resists all impositions and obligations to act. This mode of freedom privileges the sovereignty of immediate desire over the sovereignty of the rational will. The attempt here is to cultivate a life-praxis where motivation comes from present desire as opposed to a prior obligation.

If I get up this morning and want to build a staircase over there, that's what I'll do – that's one of the great things about this space – you can basically do what you want

so long as it contributes to the project – and we don't have to wait for the weekly meeting to do it, we're not so tied down with endless over-organising that just puts people off (KG, Fieldnotes September 2012).

Amenability to spontaneity is in part produced by the materiality of the space, in part by the position of relative privilege inhabited by individual participants and in part by active decisions participants make about their lives. The state of disrepair in which we found the building meant that on a given day there were a multitude of evident repairs 'in need' of attention. Virtually anything you set your efforts to would be an improvement and appreciated by others. 'Just doing it' was therefore prioritised over awaiting consensus in lengthy decision-making processes. Occasionally a participant might remark that the actions of another may not have been the most pressing task, but rarely would anyone prohibit another from doing something unless it clearly conflicted with the implicit principles of the space or an existing plan set out in the weekly meeting. Even then, such transgressions did occur and usually with minimal to zero repercussions.

More spontaneous forms of organising and action are also facilitated by life-positions that are in some way chosen. Unlike Kebele, most Factory participants are squatters and very few work full-time or have children or other major time-commitments. Life for most was simply more amenable to spontaneous action, be it attending a demonstration, responding to a call to defend an eviction, or simply to stop and talk, cook food, or fix a leaky roof. Choosing a life of fewer constraints and making a commitment to work against the imposition of new ones was for many an active life-practice. This was productive of a form of liberated self-hood in accordance with a view of freedom as the amenability to sense and act from more immediate desires.

This is not unproblematic. Such a framework implies that those who have actively chosen a life of liminality instead of having had it forced upon them are in some sense 'freer' – since this life is their desire. This privileges those from more stable and middle-class backgrounds in the attainment of insider-status. Similarly, spontaneous action outside of a collective process, whilst offering a particular sense of liberation to some, is not necessarily experienced by, or indeed amenable to all, equally. The participant, KG, quoted above, is a key member of the group, elevated in the informal hierarchy as a productive, dynamic, confident and articulate white male. He

feels able to do what he wants, liberated from a 'restrictive' process. Others with whom I spoke, both residents and non-resident-participants, felt less able to embark on any project they wished to, were less clear about what needed doing, and more fearful of critique or negative feedback. Citing such problems, new volunteers often disappeared, and, as the project endured, the number of non-resident participants dwindled. The ability to act confidently and know what 'needs' to be done (or what others in the group will likely regard as useful) relies in a large part on insider status, a status which is not exclusive to, but is certainly more easily accessed by, those with particular social privileges.

The notion of freedom as coextensive with sovereignty of the desiring subject is draws explicitly on the work of Max Stirner, who commonly is referenced in the post-leftist anarchism of Bey (1991), Black (1997) and the anarchist-individualist and egoist writings (Landstreicher 2009, n.d.; Enemies of Society 2011) that have become popular within the insurrectionist and anti-organisationalist milieus that populate the Factory. Newman's post-anarchism draws on Stirner when he argues that '[f]or freedom to have any value it must be based on the power of the individual to create it'. Citing Stirner directly, Newman argues that,

[m]y freedom becomes complete only when it is my--*might*; but by this I cease to be a merely free man and become my own man (Stirner 1995: 151 cited in Newman 2003: 19).

Here 'free man' refers to the liberal subject of freedom – autonomous rational man. For Stirner, 'the state betrays its enmity to me by demanding that I be a man' – that is, in pre-defining subjectivity with the moral imperatives and individual-state relationships that the subject position 'man' entails. Freedom is not to be found in becoming subject to the state, rationality or any idea, institution or individual other than oneself. Stirner thus rejects the notion of freedom as coextensive with rational subjectivity and the claim therein that rationality is universally embedded in all subjects. In doing so, he provides an antidote to the latent rationalism and attendant moral obligation bound up in much anarchist praxis.

However, Stirner's concept of 'ownness' is so pure as to present a vision of the individual as feasibly sovereign. Sovereign agency is not only epistemologically

suspect – implying that it is possible to fully disentangle oneself from the webs of connection through which selves emerge – it also entails the re-inscription of a binary between the subject and power. Unlike the humanist subject, the sovereign self is empty of content and thus avoids a particular form of essentialism (and its oppressive effects). However, if the subject is pure, power remains its ‘constitutive outside’ – a corrupting outside influence (which itself implies a benign essence) rather than something through which subjects emerge. This is potentially harmful – if we fail to see power-laden practices as productive of subjects, we will lack the analytical tools to expose the disciplinary and, in some cases, oppressive effects of particular modes of subject formation (like the call to sovereign subjectivity) – we lack the ability to differentiate between more liberating and more oppressive modes of subjectification (Eisenstadt 2016).

Ironically it is precisely this binary between the subject and power that Newman’s post-anarchist engagement with Stirner seeks to avoid. While Stirner may have proposed something more subtle than the pure sovereign self, this is how he has largely been understood by individualist and insurrectionist anarchists. As Meme writes in the introduction to a 2011 anthology of egoist and anarchist individualist writing that circulated at the Factory,

Nothing more, nothing less is postulated within [Stirner’s] *The Ego And His Own* than the absolute sovereignty of the individual in the face of all attempts at his/her weakening and suppression (Meme 2011: xvi).

From this perspective, anything deemed to be ‘outside’ the individual, is necessarily a suppression of that individual, be those concepts or ‘spooks’ like rational man or human nature, or the desires or wishes of another. While this acts as a potent critique of the way in which liberalism attempts to position the definition and characteristics of ‘free man’ beyond contestation, it ends in a disavowal of the call of another – altruism, the response to the call of another – is seen as a form of self-oppression. The collective here is thought of as inherently repressive of and diametrically opposed to the sovereign self. Perversely, this purist account of the individual/collective tension re-produces a ‘spook’ in the totalizing figure of the individual, which in turn draws on the figure of ‘man’ as essentially selfish to legitimise and explain individual desire.

The individualist position does powerfully address a set of problems with rational subjectivity. Its suspicion of altruism is useful for the critique of self-sacrifice in activism to the extent that it forces the reflective subject to question 'own' motives and desires and to recognise the ways in which acts 'for others' are also acts 'for ourselves'. There is here a potent critique of the disciplinarity of collective process through the production of norms and modes of organising perceived to be excessively rigid. Additionally, individualist critique draws attention to the extent to which governance, indeed domination, is made possible through the acquiescence and, in certain cases, cultivated desire on the part of the subject to be governed or dominated.

Ideological anarchists don't like to hear this but the state continues to exist, not solely by violent conquest or deception but because there is a demand for its services from the sheep habituated to governance (Meme 2011: xiii).

However, as this quote demonstrates, there is often a patronising edge to this insight that sets apart the 'dominated mass' from the 'enlightened individualist'. For the militant individualist 'to make my freedom conditional upon the freedom of others is to turn me into their servant' (*ibid*: xvi). Viewing any curtailment of action as a form of servitude only really makes sense from the viewpoint of the highly privileged individual. From the perspective of those with less privilege, what the individualist sees as curtailment could instead be experienced as emancipatory. Within the looser organising practices at the Factory, those participants that tended to feel individually liberated from a restrictive process were often 'key' members, elevated in the informal hierarchies through access to intersecting privileges. For those without insider status, clearer process can facilitate freer and more equal participation if so desired. From the individualist perspective those desiring a clearer process would either be deluded 'sheep' desirous of their own oppression (since their freedom would entail collective limitation) or be lying about their 'true' desires for non-limitation. Thus, and mirroring the rationalist inability to countenance the lack of desire for participation, one specific form of freedom, is presented as universal/innate and is duly imposed on others such that they are rendered stupid, liars or non-human if they do not desire it. This Stirner-influenced anarchism is faced with two options: a naïve belief in the benevolence of human nature such that when

all restrictions are removed humans will naturally cooperate regardless of power imbalances, or alternatively, a nihilism in which the strong dominating the weak does not matter, everything is legitimate as the liberation of 'own' desire.

Paradoxically, and again mirroring rational subjectivity, desiring subjectivity also entails oppressive effects for the individual subject of freedom. If liberation is the access to and unrestricted fulfilment of individual desire, what it means to be free is severely curtailed. The individual is trapped in an endless quest to discover and sate 'true' desire, never experiencing the liberating feeling of letting go, of not having to win or choose or of those joys, desires, connections that emerge between subjects and sometimes exceed them.

Sovereignty or Sovereignty – It's Your Choice

Whether freedom is constituted by knowing and acting on the rational will or 'own' desire, liberation remains coextensive with sovereign subjectivity. This popular framing makes intuitive sense from within the normative discourses that frame anarchist social centres. In a world of oppressive social norms, seductive advertising, ubiquitous surveillance and laws backed by punitive sanctions, liberation is experienced in the 'stripping away of the layers of control' in search of a pure uncorrupted self. However, as poststructuralist critics have argued, there is no 'pure uncorrupted' self beneath these layers (cf. Butler 2005). Wills and desires are never wholly ours, but rather co-emerge in the always-already social settings through which we become.

Sometimes events exceed our conscious aspirations – when a march breaks free of a prescribed route and we run through the streets (CrimethInc 2012b) or when a conversation at a bus-stop bus makes a connection across difference we had never imagined. We did not desire these experiences previously, we did not rationally consent – they emerged through us in specific contexts with others. There is agency but it is never purely realized, nor, in its impurity, necessarily repressed. (Fieldnotes 2012)

This observation may seem obvious, but it strikes a fundamental discord with the prevailing orthodoxy of anarchist thought and practice at the Factory, at Kebele and in influential movement literatures. From this perspective, the co-emergence of desire, or wills, constitutes a form of oppression, as do forms of self-discipline that aim to account for the freedom of the other.

In positing a pure self, we reinscribe a binary between the subject and power. The irony here is that both accounts are discourses of empowerment, but power is seen as a commodity to be 'taken back' by the individual or 're-distributed' by the collective. This produces a 'blind-spot' to the ways in which subjects are constituted or formed through practices of power. This 'constitutive character' of power is not inherently oppressive, but unless we are able to analyse it, we are unable to differentiate between dominating and non-dominating practices of liberated subject-formation. Unless we understand anarchist practices of freedom as governmental, then we will be unable to think and practice more emancipatory modes of governing. The question for anarchists, and for anyone desiring freedom with social equality, is how we differentiate between these governmental techniques that foster individuality at the expense of equality, and those practices of self-cultivation that work to enhance it.

In order to begin to answer this we need to think of freedom and discipline as mutually constituted – to look to the ways in which practices of self-discipline that are required to cultivate egalitarian relations with others might be liberating for the subject. Secondly, we need to see subjects as mutually constituted – to discard the sovereign subject as the fulcrum of human liberation and instead to think of freedom in a context in which subjects and selves overlap and agency is never pure. This is profoundly troubling for anarchist thought – what would such a liberation look like and how could we know when we had found it? This is our challenge.

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